

CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR.

MEMORANDUM

March 22, 2021

To: Subcommittee on Communications and Technology and Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff

Re: Hearing on "Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Disinformation"

On <u>Thursday, March 25, 2021, at 12 p.m. via Cisco Webex online video</u> <u>conferencing</u>, the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology and the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce will hold a joint hearing entitled, "Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Disinformation."

I. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN PROMOTING MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMIST CONTENT

A. Background

Facebook, Google, and Twitter operate some of the largest and most influential online social media platforms reaching billions of users across the globe. As a result, they are among the largest platforms for the dissemination of misinformation and extremist content. These platforms maximize their reach—and advertising dollars—by using algorithms or other technologies to promote content and make content recommendations that increase user engagement. Users of these platforms often engage more with questionable or provocative content, thus the algorithms often elevate or amplify disinformation and extremist content. Facebook, Google, and Twitter also have access to vast swaths of user data that allows them to microtarget content to users who would be more susceptible to disinformation and extremist content.

¹ See NYU Stern Center For Business And Human Rights, *Tackling Domestic Disinformation: What The Social Media Companies Need To Do* (Apr. 3, 2019).

² See id.

³ See id.

⁴ See How Data Privacy Laws Can Fight Fake News, Just Security (Aug. 15, 2019).

B. The Spread and Consequences of Misinformation and Extremist Content

Facebook, Google, and Twitter have long come under fire for their role in the dissemination and amplification of misinformation and extremist content. For instance, since the beginning of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, all three platforms have spread substantial amounts of misinformation about COVID-19.⁵ At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation regarding the severity of the virus and the effectiveness of alleged cures for COVID-19 was widespread.⁶ More recently, COVID-19 disinformation has misrepresented the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines.⁷

Facebook, Google, and Twitter have also been distributors for years of election disinformation that appeared to be intended either to improperly influence or undermine the outcomes of free and fair elections.⁸ During the November 2016 election, social media platforms were used by foreign governments to disseminate information to manipulate public opinion.⁹ This trend continued during and after the November 2020 election, often fomented by domestic actors, with rampant disinformation about voter fraud, defective voting machines, and premature declarations of victory.¹⁰

Additionally, Facebook executives were repeatedly warned that extremist content was thriving on their platform, and that Facebook's own algorithms and recommendation tools were responsible for the appeal of extremist groups and divisive content. Similarly, since 2015, videos from extremists have proliferated on YouTube; and YouTube's algorithm often guides

⁵ Democratic Senators Urge Facebook, Google and Twitter to Crack Down on Vaccine Misinformation, CNBC (Jan. 25, 2021); Surge of Virus Misinformation Stumps Facebook and Twitter, New York Times (Mar. 8, 2020).

⁶ *Id*.

^{7 &#}x27;We Are Talking About People's Lives': Dire Warnings of Public Health Crisis as COVID-19 Misinformation Rages, USA Today (Dec. 9, 2020); Misinformation Messengers Pivot from Election Fraud to Peddling Vaccine Conspiracy Theories, New York Times (Dec. 16, 2020); Normalization of Vaccine Misinformation on Social Media Amid COVID 'a Huge problem,' ABC News (Dec. 10, 2020); COVID Vaccine: Disappearing Needles and Other Rumors Debunked, BBC News (Dec. 20, 2020).

⁸ Election 2020: Facebook, Twitter And YouTube Wrestle With Misinformation, CNET (Nov. 11, 2020); NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, Disinformation and the 2020 Election: How the Social Media Industry Should Prepare (Sept. 1, 2019).

⁹ *The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election*, New York Times (Feb. 16, 2018).

¹⁰ 'Not A Whole Lot Of Innovation': 2020 Election Misinformation Was Quite Predictable, Experts Say, USA Today (Nov. 17, 2021); Did Social Media Actually Counter Election Misinformation?, Associated Press, (Nov. 4, 2020).

¹¹ Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts To Make The Site Less Divisive, Wall Street Journal (May 26, 2020); Facebook Knew Calls For Violence Plagued 'Groups,' Now Plans Overhaul, Wall Street Journal (Jan. 31, 2020).

users from more innocuous or alternative content to more fringe channels and videos.¹² Twitter has been criticized for being slow to stop white nationalists from organizing, fundraising, recruiting and spreading propaganda on Twitter.¹³

The consequences of disinformation and extremist content on these platforms are apparent. Many experts agree that disinformation about COVID-19 has greatly intensified an already deadly public health crisis. Experts also acknowledge that misinformation about the 2020 presidential election and extremist content has further divided the nation and provoked an insurrection. 15

C. Facebook, Google, and Twitter's Response to Misinformation and Extremist Content

All three platforms have a policy against demonstrably false COVID-19 information or COVID-19 misinformation that can cause harm. Facebook and Twitter also demote or label certain misinformation, such as misinformation about social and political issues. ¹⁷

In September 2020, Facebook adopted new policies related to the November election such as banning political advertisements and labeling allegations of election fraud. After the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol riots, Facebook began removing disinformation that could lead to further violence. Last month, Facebook updated its policies on COVID-19 misinformation from initially removing false information "that could lead to imminent physical harm" to banning misinformation about COVID-19 and threatening to ban users, groups, or pages that repeatedly spread misinformation. ²⁰

In October 2020, YouTube announced it would remove videos containing misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, expanding on its prohibition of COVID-19 misinformation that

¹² Cornell University, Auditing Radicalization Pathways On YouTube (Dec. 4, 2019).

¹³ Twitter Suspends More Than 50 White Nationalist Accounts, NBC News (July 10, 2020); Twitter Still Has A White Nationalist Problem, HuffPost (May 30, 2019).

¹⁴ The Union of Concerned Scientists, *We Just Witnessed the Dangers of the Autocratic Disinformation Playbook* (Jan. 8, 2021) (blog.ucsusa.org/genna-reed/dangers-of-autocratic-disinformation-playbook).

¹⁵ *Id*.

¹⁶ On Social Media, Only Some Lies Are Against The Rules, Consumer Reports (Aug. 13, 2020).

¹⁷ *Id*.

¹⁸ Facebook, *New Steps to Protect the US Elections* (Sept. 3, 2020) (press release).

¹⁹ Facebook, Our Preparations Ahead of Inauguration Day (Jan. 11, 2021) (press release).

²⁰ Facebook, An Update on Our Work to Keep People Informed and Limit Misinformation About COVID-19 (Feb. 8, 2021) (press release).

contradicted local health authorities or the World Health Organization.²¹ In December 2020, YouTube announced it would begin removing content that falsely alleged widespread election fraud, but that policy would not apply to videos uploaded prior to the announcement.²² After the U.S. Capitol riots, YouTube announced that it would suspend accounts that promoted videos of false allegations about the 2020 presidential election.²³

In advance of the November 2020 election, Twitter expanded the use of its warning labels to limit the spread of election misinformation.²⁴ In December 2020, Twitter announced it would label misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines.

These platforms often ramp up their efforts against misinformation and extremist content in response to social and political pressure.²⁵ Despite these efforts, recent studies have found that COVID-19 misinformation and extremist content continue to thrive on these platforms.²⁶

II. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Mark Zuckerberg

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Facebook

Sundar Pichai

Chief Executive Officer Google

²¹ YouTube Bans Covid-19 Vaccine Misinformation, Forbes (Oct. 14, 2020); On Social Media, Only Some Lies Are Against the Rules, Consumer Reports (Aug. 13, 2020).

²² YouTube Official Blog, *Supporting The 2020 U.S. Election* (Dec. 9, 2020) (blog.youtube/news-and-events/supporting-the-2020-us-election/).

²³ YouTube Will Start Penalizing Channels That Post Election Misinformation, TechCrunch (Jan. 7, 2021).

²⁴ Twitter Blog, *Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election* (Oct. 9, 2020) (blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/2020-election-changes.html).

²⁵ See The Technology 202: Democrats Ratchet Up Pressure on Silicon Valley to Tackle Vaccine Misinformation, Washington Post (Jan. 26, 2021); Social Media Platforms Face A Reckoning Over Hate Speech, Associated Press (June 29, 2020); EU Piles Pressure On Social Media Over Fake News, Reuters (Apr. 26, 2018).

²⁶ Cybersecurity for Democracy, Far-Right News Sources On Facebook More Engaging (Mar. 3, 2021); Pew Research Center, How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review (Feb. 22, 2021); Anti-Defamation League, Exposure to Alternative & Extremist Content on YouTube (Feb. 12, 2021); The German Marshall Fund, Engagement With Deceptive Outlets Higher on Facebook Today than Run-Up to 2016 Election (Oct. 12, 2020).

Jack Dorsey Chief Executive Officer Twitter